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Families Matter Helps Keep Children with Families

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Families Matter is changing how families are being served through the child welfare and juvenile services system in Nebraska. At the heart of the *Families Matter* reform are a few core principles, including:

- Children grow best in their own homes.
- Children should be reunified with their family, or moved in a timely manner to a loving, permanent placement through adoption or guardianship arrangements.
- Families should get needed services as soon as possible.

We are developing a range of services that reflect these principles, guided by research in the field of child and family development.

Helping children remain at home is one of the outcomes we are focused on achieving. Wherever possible, we want to help more state wards remain at home with their families.

We want to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care in favor of serving more children at home and in familiar surroundings. Out-of-home placements are decreasing. In February of 2010 there were 4,351 state wards in out-of-home care. This year there were 211 fewer children in out-of-home care. We are beginning to making progress toward our goal.

We're working with private and public partners to develop better outcomes for children. We are moving in the right direction. Our private partners have played an important role during the past year. KVC Behavioral Healthcare is coordinating cases in southeast Nebraska. KVC and the Nebraska Families Collaborative are coordinating cases involving children living in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. They are working alongside state caseworkers to help children and families. Nebraska Families Collaborative is made up of Boys Town, Child Saving Institute, Heartland Family Service, Nebraska Family Support Network, and OMNI Behavioral Health.

Whether a case is managed by state or private agency caseworkers, the state Division of Children and Families retains responsibility for children who are state wards. Our top priority in every case is to do what is in the best interest of the child.

For most children, what's best is having a safe and stable place to grow up. That is why we are shifting away from group home placements and traditional foster care that takes children out of their homes, in favor of services that help children remain at home or be placed with relatives in family foster care. In cases where reunification is not in the best interest of a child, we are working to identify those situations much sooner so that adoptive placements can be secured earlier and children do not linger in out-of-home placements.

We are also serving more children and families through voluntary services, rather than requiring that children becoming wards of the state to access help. Almost 500 families are receiving services to help resolve issues, without the involvement of the courts.

In addition, more than 1,500 families are receiving new aftercare services designed to provide support during the year after their case has closed. Whether it's a simple phone call to visit with a caseworker, or the need to access more intensive services such as therapy and family support; research shows aftercare services help reduce the likelihood of children returning as wards of the state. The shift to these and other family-centered practices means families have a way to access support as needed, rather than cases remaining active before a judge indefinitely.

I encourage you to learn more about *Families Matter* online at <http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/FamiliesMatter/> to find the latest data on our progress. You will find success stories and links to more information on our partners in this effort.

Providing individualized services to children and families requires that we have stronger relationships with service providers, Nebraska judges, and the many advocates who play a critical role in assisting families. I want to thank our partners for their continued work to improve the safety and welfare of children and youth in Nebraska.

Together, we're focused on providing Nebraska children with permanent homes and appropriate services to match their needs.